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Seventh report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolutions 1886 (2009) and 1941 (2010), in which the Council requested me to submit a report on the activities of the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL) every six months. The report covers the period from 1 March to 31 August 2011.

II. Major developments

2. During the reporting period, Sierra Leone celebrated its fiftieth anniversary of independence with a sense of national pride and a growing determination to make further progress in addressing the socio-economic challenges facing the country and in consolidating peace and stability.

3. The main political parties intensified their preparations for the 2012 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections. The major opposition party, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), successfully resolved a court case that had been filed against the party. It then held a national conference at which it elected its presidential candidate for the 2012 elections. President Koroma was nominated as the candidate of the ruling All Peoples Congress (APC) at its conference at Makeni in 2009. Also, planning for the 2012 elections by the National Electoral Commission reached an advanced stage, and voter registration is scheduled for the first quarter of 2012. Sierra Leone is now poised for the 2012 elections.

4. If the current financial projections are achieved, the expansion of Sierra Leone's mining sector would, in the near future, significantly increase the country's revenues, which, in turn could help the Government bring about important social and economic changes. However, in order to sustain such encouraging prospects, the establishment of strong accountability and transparency mechanisms would be required. Other outstanding challenges facing the country include youth unemployment and the adverse impact of urbanization, poverty, as well as the high cost of living.

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A. Political developments

5. The overall political situation remained calm, but the relationship between the ruling APC and the opposition SLPP continued to be characterized by deep mutual mistrust.

6. Sierra Leone celebrated its fiftieth anniversary of independence on 29 April 2011. In a speech to mark the occasion, President Koroma recalled the violent conflict of the 1990s and affirmed that the country was celebrating a new Sierra Leone that will sustain peace, democracy and development. He emphasized the need for Sierra Leoneans to resolve their political differences through peaceful, civil and constitutional means. The President also acknowledged efforts made by international partners such as the United Kingdom, Nigeria and the United Nations to help end the country's civil war. As part of the anniversary celebration, UNIPSIL, with financial assistance from the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund and in collaboration with local groups, arranged for a "peace torch" to be carried throughout the country, which provided an opportunity for various stakeholders to reaffirm their commitment to peace and unity in Sierra Leone.

7. From 29 to 31 July 2011, SLPP held a national conference in Freetown and elected retired Brigadier Maada Bio, a former Head of State, as the party's presidential candidate for the 2012 elections. There were 19 candidates, including three women. Members of the SLPP national executive committee were also elected at the conference, which was preceded by intra-party dissension and violence. Furthermore, one of the presidential candidates had filed a complaint with the Supreme Court of Sierra Leone on the grounds that the mandate of the party's delegates to the national conference had expired. That led to the granting of an injunction by the Supreme Court restraining the party from holding the national conference earlier.

8. Also, during this period, my Executive Representative consulted with senior members of SLPP and offered his good offices to help concerned officials iron out their differences and organize a successful conference. The party conducted intra-party elections for its district and constituency positions and, on 19 July, the Supreme Court lifted the injunction, paving the way for the national conference.

9. Overall, the conference was well conducted and the voting was credible, according to local and international observers. The meetings convened by the candidates throughout the country to actively canvass the support of delegates was a positive step for Sierra Leone's democracy. The police provided security for the conference and, in a goodwill gesture, the ruling APC ordered that its offices, which were in the vicinity of the conference, be closed and its members were instructed not to appear in party colours. However, at a press conference held on 5 August, the APC Secretary-General, Victor Foh, raised questions about the role of Mr. Bio (the SLPP presidential candidate) in the military regime of the National Provisional Ruling Council, which overthrew an APC Government in March 1992. Mr. Foh stated that the country had a responsibility to collectively reject Mr. Bio's candidacy at the 2012 elections.

10. There were also continued dissensions within the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), the third party represented in Parliament. PMDC has had ministerial representation in the Cabinet since 2007, but on 7 April it announced that it was leaving the coalition with the ruling party, a position that was publicly

challenged by three PMDC ministers serving in the Koroma administration. Two of them subsequently announced their resignation from the party.

11. A crucial by-election held during the reporting period was the one in Kailahun District, in the eastern region, on 28 May. The vacancy arose from the appointment of the incumbent parliamentarian, from SLPP, to a ministerial position in the APC Government, and his subsequent resignation from the party. The district is part of the political stronghold of SLPP. The political campaign was tense, with clashes between supporters of SLPP and APC, as well as of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). To prevent further deterioration, UNIPSIL facilitated a visit to the district by representatives of the international community in Freetown. They met with the candidates and other stakeholders to impress on them the need to exercise restraint. UNIPSIL also helped mobilize, in collaboration with the Political Parties Registration Commission, the All Political Parties Youth Association to lead efforts aimed at tackling political violence. This paved the way for the conduct of a peaceful election, which was won by the SLPP candidate.

Implementation of the joint communiqué of 2 April

12. Though the Government is yet to release the White Paper on the investigation into the political disturbances in March 2009, UNIPSIL continued its efforts to help implement the joint communiqué of 2 April. UNIPSIL, with funding from the Peacebuilding Fund, was instrumental in facilitating the establishment of the All Political Parties Women's Association, launched by President Koroma in Bo on 12 June. The President used the opportunity to reiterate his pledge to adopt a 30 per cent quota for women in the country's governance and elective institutions. The All Political Parties Women's Association, whose convention elected a national executive committee, has continued its media outreach and held coordination meetings with the female parliamentary caucus, female councillors and civil society organizations on ways of increasing the political participation of women.

13. The All Political Parties Youth Association is another initiative supported by UNIPSIL, with financial support from the Peacebuilding Fund. It comprises SLPP, APC, PMDC and NDA, and has become fully operational after establishing chapters in all of the country's 112 constituencies. It has also established an office in Freetown. To underscore the need for accountability, a financial manual was developed. Both Associations will serve as vital forums for promoting conflict resolution, political tolerance and non-violence in the 2012 elections.

14. During the reporting period, an outreach programme to spread the messages of political tolerance and national cohesion contained in the joint communiqué through films and drama sketches was prepared. The implementation of these programmes will commence shortly and target communities in chiefdoms experiencing political tensions. In addition, the films will be broadcast on national television and radio across the country. These activities to implement the joint communiqué were undertaken by UNIPSIL with financial assistance provided by the Peacebuilding Fund.

Preparations for the 2012 elections

15. Preparations are under way for the 2012 elections, tentatively scheduled for the last quarter of 2012. In order to ensure proper coordination and coherence in planning for the elections, two election steering committee meetings were held,

which were co-chaired by the Minister for Finance and Economic Development and my Executive Representative. They were attended by international development partners and key national stakeholders. The National Electoral Commission gave an overview of vital material assistance thus far provided by the Government, which will share the funding for the elections with international partners. The Commission, with assistance from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), also began a review of its 2010-2014 strategic plan, with a focus on the 2012 election budget. Discussions are under way on the concerns raised by the representative of the police during the Steering Committee meetings that special attention should be paid to enhancing police mobility.

16. Special attention is also being given to initiating an electoral legal reform process that will ensure, among others, that the legal controversy which arose in the 2007 presidential elections regarding the authority of the National Electoral Commission to nullify votes, is addressed. Accordingly, the Commission, with support from the UNDP-managed electoral basket fund and UNIPSIL, organized an electoral legal reform workshop from 29 to 31 March 2011, which was attended by the political parties and civil society. The workshop submitted its recommendations to a technical committee, comprising the Law Reform Commission and the Law Officers Department, UNIPSIL and representatives of civil society. The committee has reviewed the conclusions of the workshop and made recommendations on several issues such as the determination of dates for the conduct of public elections, the rules for the election of a president, and forfeiture of parliamentary seats.

17. The legal reform process involving the Political Parties Registration Commission has started, and it will examine issues relating to the competencies of the Commission, including sanctions for breaches of the code of conduct of political parties and the possibility of granting quasi-judicial authority to the Commission to deal with such infractions.

18. Considerable progress has also been made in developing a biometric voter registration system for the 2012 elections. UNDP provided an international expert who worked closely with the Commission on the modalities for the system. In accordance with the established procurement requirements, a joint NEC/UNDP technical evaluation panel identified, in early June, two successful bidders, who have since carried out field testing in Sierra Leone of various components of their biometric equipment. To ensure transparency, a number of observers from political parties, civil society and the Political Parties Registration Commission were invited to monitor the tests. The results of the tests were positive as both systems were able to process required data.

19. The National Electoral Commission held a press conference in June to raise awareness of the biometric system. It also plans to carry out extensive voter sensitization and to brief the political parties on the system. Voter registration is scheduled to take place in the first quarter of 2012.

Contribution of non-State actors

20. During the reporting period, UNIPSIL continued to work with the Inter-Religious Council, paramount chiefs, youth and women groups, artists, community-based organizations, the media and academic institutions to mobilize key non-State actors to play a constructive role in the 2012 elections. The project also aims at building the capacities of these institutions to carry out, in the longer

term, conflict prevention and mediation tasks, especially when the political presence of the United Nations in Sierra Leone draws down. To that end, UNIPSIL, in collaboration with the Ministry of Local Government and Community Development, organized a conference of paramount chiefs in Bo City from 19 to 22 April. The conference resulted in the adoption of the Bo Communiqué of 22 April 2011, which, among other things, calls on paramount chiefs to remain neutral in politics. UNIPSIL has begun an outreach programme on the contents of the communiqué. UNIPSIL is also concluding, in consultation with the Political Parties Registration Commission, arrangements for capacity-building and limited infrastructural support to some political parties in the country.

21. An agreement was signed between UNIPSIL and the Independent Radio Network (IRN) to coordinate the dissemination of messages of peace and non-violence through IRN's network of 24 community radio stations in the country. UNIPSIL provided interim support to Cotton Tree News to improve its linkage with IRN. To facilitate further discussions on a code of conduct for the media and election-related issues, UNIPSIL sponsored a conference of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists in Kenema. In consultation with several youth groups, and the Sierra Leone Union on Disability Issues, UNIPSIL is finalizing a sensitization programme targeting youths and marginalized groups in the country that will convey messages of non-violence using a peer-to-peer approach and through sports. A series of seminars to promote national unity and cohesion are also being planned in collaboration with institutions of higher learning. All these activities are funded by the Peacebuilding Fund.

B. Security developments

22. The overall security situation remained calm during the period under review. However, the Sierra Leone Police expressed concern over the proliferation of small arms, particularly locally manufactured shot guns. They stressed the need for the public to help prevent and curb their use. The problem appeared to be complicated by porous borders that allowed the flow of illegal weapons. In preparation for the 2012 elections, the National Security Council Coordinating Group, including the Police, the Armed Forces and other security sector agencies, has approved an election security strategy amounting to $11.7 million and covering several important areas, including training, logistics, and the establishment of command and control apparatus.

C. Economic and social developments

23. With Sierra Leone's real gross domestic product (GDP) increasing by approximately 5 per cent in 2010, the economy is emerging from the effects of the global economic downturn, which had reduced real GDP growth to 3.2 per cent in 2009. Economic recovery in 2010 was led by growth in manufacturing, mining, construction and agriculture sectors, and supported during the second half by a large increase in public spending. The increased public spending was on account of several priority infrastructure projects.

24. However, as a result of factors such as the depreciation of the local currency in 2010 and an increase in Government spending, the inflation averaged nearly 18 per

cent through 2010. The fiscal expansion also led to an increase in interest rates in the economy. During the first half of 2011, the Government put in place strong corrective measures to stabilize the fiscal situation, which have proven effective so far.

25. In May, the Government increased fuel pump prices by nearly 30 per cent because of rising global prices and the removal of fuel subsidies, but subsequently lowered them by about 10 per cent when global prices fell, and when threatened by protests by youth groups. Such increases could potentially inflict hardships on the poor, and the Government is looking at stepping up safety nets.

26. Regarding the mining sector, on 20 July, the Government launched a workplan for the Sierra Leone Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. In addition to the workplan, a minerals negotiating team was established to review all mining contracts. Earlier, on 21 April, the World Bank approved a grant of $4 million for building local capacity to prepare and negotiate mining agreements and to ensure regulatory compliance.

27. The likely future increases in domestic revenue from the mining sector and the hydrocarbon sector will create significant opportunities, including enabling the Government to overcome the huge infrastructure deficit and to increase spending on human development priorities. At the same time, there are risks, and these revenues need to be carefully managed in order to avoid any adverse impact on traditional sectors such as agriculture, or to prevent a boom and bust cycle. Careful consideration would need to be given to these issues during the preparation and the implementation of the Agenda for Change 2 strategy.

28. The Free Health Care Initiative continued to provide vital life-saving medical care and drugs to children under the age of 5, as well as pregnant and lactating women. With key support from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Kingdom Department for International Development and other partners, the Government ensured access to health care at every level for the target group. Efforts to strengthen drug distribution systems and prevent leakages started in the reporting period. The preparation of five Key Pillar Documents, including the joint programme review for the national strategic plan on HIV/AIDS, were completed in the reporting period. These documents will guide national response to HIV/AIDS into the coming decade. Parliament also enacted the National AIDS Commission Act, which establishes the Commission and provides for the protection of people living with HIV/AIDS, including widows. It will soon be signed into law by President Koroma.

III. Main risks to peace consolidation

A. Youth

29. Unacceptably high levels of youth unemployment persist and remain a threat to peace consolidation. Current initiatives to address the problem include a $10 million cash-for-work scheme, as well as a $6 million employment proposal scheme, both of which are funded by the World Bank. The Bank further provides institutional support valued at $1 million. UNDP, the International Labour

Organization and GTZ: Partner for the Future Worldwide are also engaged in youth employment and empowerment schemes.

30. Efforts to address youth unemployment were bolstered with the approval of Parliament, on 7 June 2011, of the appointment of a commissioner to head the National Youth Commission and thus strengthen coordination in this area. Counterpart ministries have signalled an intention to collaborate with the Commission. After the appointment of the commissioner, a strategic planning meeting of key stakeholders was held on 10 and 11 June 2011. UNDP provided technical support for the establishment of the Youth Commission and refurbished its premises. It also procured office equipment for the Commission.

B. Corruption

31. Tackling corruption remains a challenge for the Government. During the reporting period, the Anti-Corruption Commission strengthened its capacity to investigate and prosecute cases in line with its strategic plan for 2011 to 2013. It also continued decentralizing its services and engaging Government departments and the public through outreach programmes aimed at inculcating anti-corruption messages in the public. On 5 May, the Commission signed a memorandum of understanding with the Government of the United Kingdom that will provide a framework for dialogue and capacity-building.

32. On 13 May, the Commission presented its annual report, as well as cheques for the sums of 611 million leones ($143,000) and $9,450 to President Koroma, who reaffirmed his support for the work of the Commission. Regarding prosecutions by the Commission, the Director-General of the National Revenue Authority was acquitted of several corruption charges, but the Commission has appealed the decision. However, it secured the conviction of other public officials, including some from the Attitudinal and Behavioral Change Secretariat, which has responsibility for promoting moral renewal in the country. The Commission faces a number of constraints, including a lack of personnel and inadequate office space in Freetown.

C. Illicit drug trafficking and organized crime

33. The Sierra Leone Transnational Organized Crime Unit continued its work within the framework of the West Africa Coast Initiative. The Unit has recorded 28 cases of drug interceptions so far in 2011.

34. However, the cultivation of *cannabis sativa* for export to neighbouring countries remains a major problem. UNIPSIL continued discussions with the police and other stakeholders on steps required to eradicate large *cannabis sativa* farms, with funds provided by Irish Aid. Discussions also focused on drawing on the Smallholder Commercial Scheme, which encourages small scale farming, as a means of providing alternative livelihoods to those engaged in the cultivation of *cannabis sativa*. Finally, the Transnational Organized Crime Unit is in the process of developing other strategies, including asset confiscation procedures.

35. During the reporting period, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) mobilized additional funding to provide appropriate premises for the

Transnational Organized Crime Unit, support the development of the forensic capacity of the Sierra Leone Police, and the strengthening of the capacity of the Joint Maritime Wing in reducing illegal activities in the territorial waters of Sierra Leone. Intelligence and law enforcement operations were conducted with a view to strengthen border management, especially at the Lungi International Airport. To counter money-laundering, UNODC provided further mentoring and equipment to the Transnational Organized Crime Unit, the Financial Intelligence Unit and the Anti-Corruption Commission.

IV. Support to democratic institutions

A. National Electoral Commission

36. In addition to preparations for the 2012 elections, the National Electoral Commission continued to conduct credible parliamentary by-elections, local council elections and chieftaincy elections. Significant technical support amounting to about $25 million was earmarked for the Commission in the UNDP-managed basket fund in areas such as information technology support and strengthening of district and regional offices. Current planning for the 2012 elections envisages a reduced level of international expertise to the Commission in contrast to the 2007 elections, which is testimony to past successful efforts in building the capacity of the Commission.

37. The interaction between SLPP and the National Electoral Commission remained difficult, with influential members of the party criticizing the leadership of the Electoral Commission and expressing reservations about an electoral education programme run by the Commission aimed at developing a pool of future electoral staff. In the period under review, the Supreme Court granted SLPP leave to argue before the Court the case filed against the Commission challenging its nullification of votes in 477 polling stations during the 2007 presidential elections. The case is still pending. Nonetheless, the Electoral Commission continues to engage with the political parties through its Political Parties Liaison Committee and discussions are under way between UNIPSIL, the Political Parties Registration Commission and the National Electoral Commission on how to improve the work of the Liaison Committee and in particular the cooperation between the political parties and the Commission.

B. Political Parties Registration Commission

38. The newly appointed Chair of the Political Parties Registration Commission, Justice Ademusu, was sworn in on 14 April. The post had been vacant for some time, and his appointment is expected to energize the work of the Commission in promoting mediation between the political parties as the 2012 elections approach. The Commission will also lead, with the support of UNIPSIL, efforts at promoting inter-party dialogue and the advancement of the joint communiqué of 2 April. Assistance to the Commission, as envisaged in the electoral basket fund, is being finalized. With additional support from the United States Agency for International Development, the mediation and conflict resolution capacity of the Political Parties Registration Commission was strengthened with training for members of its district

code of conduct monitoring committees. Regular sittings of the Committees have commenced.

C. Independent Media Commission

39. In the reporting period, the High Court of Sierra Leone upheld a decision of the Independent Media Commission, denying a licence to the Freetown City Council to operate a radio station. The Council is managed by the ruling APC party. The High Court also upheld a ruling of the Commission closing down the SLPP radio station. The Commission noted at the time that broadcasts on political party radio stations had contributed to incidents of political intolerance and violence. The Commission will receive assistance under the electoral basket fund to improve its media regulatory mechanisms in the run-up to the 2012 elections.

D. Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation

40. In a bid to demonstrate that the corporation can be impartial and afford access to all political parties, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation covered the recently concluded SLPP national conference and provided airtime to the 19 SLPP presidential candidates. UNIPSIL, with financial assistance from the Peacebuilding Fund, continued to assist the corporation with salary support for 160 staff, as well as technical advice in the programme production. However, a review of the corporation's financial and operational capabilities may be necessary to enable it to function effectively as an independent national broadcaster. Such review should take into account its staffing and remuneration levels vis-à-vis available resources.

E. Parliament

41. Parliament, with the support of UNDP, began recruiting staff for eight administrative departments called for in the Parliamentary Service Act. Some staff will assume responsibility for preparing the parliamentary *Hansard* and dissemination of parliamentary legislation to the public.

F. Decentralization and devolution

42. The number of functions devolved in the decentralization and devolution process remained at 46, from a total of 80. Progress in the devolution process was hampered by inertia of the central government, coupled with limited capacity in key areas in some local councils and poor conditions of service.

V. Human rights

National Human Rights Commission

43. During the reporting period, the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone exercised its quasi-judicial mandate in its first public hearing in a matter involving 235 former Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) soldiers who had been

compulsorily retired because of their categorizations by RSLAF as "chronically ill" and "mentally imbalanced". In a landmark decision, rendered on 27 June 2011, the Commission held that the former soldiers had suffered discrimination and inhumane treatment and had their right to privacy violated. The Government has not appealed the decision.

44. In another significant development, the independence of the Commission was recognized with an "A" status accreditation in June 2011 by the International Coordination Committee of the National Human Rights Institutions.

45. On 10 March 2011, the Parliament unanimously passed the Persons with Disabilities Act, which provides for the establishment of a national commission for persons with disabilities. This was a major step towards addressing the challenge of discrimination.

46. Several capacity-building programmes were implemented in the period under review by UNIPSIL, such as technical support to the Human Rights Commission in establishing the Monitoring and Research Directorate and training in human rights monitoring for its personnel.

VI. Gender issues

47. During the reporting period, UNIPSIL and the United Nations country team adopted, in line with the Joint Vision strategy, a four-pronged approach in addressing gender matters that consisted of (a) the promotion of access to health care for women and girls; (b) access to political participation and decision-making; (c) access to justice for women and girls; and (d) efforts to address gender-based violence. The United Nations Global Open Day for Women and Peace is tentatively scheduled for 27 and 28 September, and planning is in progress.

48. On the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security and the Sierra Leone national action plan, UNIPSIL and members of the M30 Taskforce, a coalition of advocacy groups, continued the preparation of a draft bill on a 30 per cent quota for women in elective positions in the country. It will be presented to Parliament in September 2011 and as an effort at increasing the participation of women. During a ceremony held on 29 March 2011 to commemorate International Women's Day and in furtherance of the national action plan, President Koroma delivered a speech in which he stated that a sexual offences bill, which will include maximum and mandatory punishment for rape, will be fast tracked in Parliament. The President pledged his support for the 30 per cent quota legislation for women and declared that 8 March, International Women's Day, will be a national holiday. Similarly, the Sierra Leone Chieftaincy Act will be reviewed to allow women to become paramount chiefs in all parts of the country. Since then, the Cabinet has approved the sexual offences bill, which will be submitted to Parliament in September 2011.

49. Other steps taken in connection with the implementation of the national action plan and in tackling sexual and gender-based violence were the establishment of information desks in Freetown courts that provide advice on laws affecting women and girls. Plans to expand the scheme to other cities are under consideration. Dedicated courts, which sit on Saturdays, have been established in Freetown to handle sexual and gender-based violence matters, and this has resulted in a

reduction of the backlog of sexual and gender-based violence cases. Also to facilitate the prosecution of sexual and gender-based violence cases, UNIPSIL worked closely with civil society organizations and the police to provide ad hoc witness protection. The absence of witnesses, or at times their reluctance to testify because of possible retribution, had impeded the prosecution of sexual and gender-based violence cases. The availability of free medical examinations for sexual and gender-based violence victims as a result of interventions by UNIPSIL and local stakeholders has also helped the prosecution of sexual and gender-based violence cases because some victims could not afford the fees charged for such examinations.

50. With assistance from UNIPSIL, UN-Women and the United Nations Population Fund, three district *Sowies* (female traditional leaders) associations were established in May and July with the goal of reaching a consensus with the *Sowies* that female genital mutilation will not be practised on girls under the age of 18. UNIPSIL has endeavoured to work closely with the *Sowies* in changing attitudes towards female genital mutilation.

51. With regard to gender mainstreaming in the security sector, the Sierra Leone Police continued to support several talented women through their ranks in an accelerated promotion programme. It also developed more family-friendly human resource policies, and the number of women being recruited continues to rise and is currently just over 10 per cent.

VII. Sustaining peacebuilding

52. During the reporting period, the United Nations country team secured $9,282,000 from the United Nations "Delivering As One" fund (compared to $9,700,000 from the "Delivering as One" fund in 2010), funding which is channelled through the Sierra Leone Multi-Donor Trust Fund established under the Joint Vision strategy. Other deposits into the Fund in 2011 were from the Australian Agency for International Development, the United Kingdom Department for International Development and the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs. Funding for the Joint Vision strategy through the Multi-Donor Trust Fund has been lower than hoped since its inception, and, as a result, the Peacebuilding Fund has been an important source of funding for the United Nations in Sierra Leone since 2007. The Peacebuilding Fund in Sierra Leone continues to support projects on non-State actors and war victims, as well as gender-related elements of the Joint Vision strategy, such as the strengthening of a referral system for victims of sexual and gender-based violence and the improvement of a legal environment that recognizes the rights of women and girls.

53. From 24 to 27 May 2011, the Chair of the Sierra Leone configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission and Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, Ambassador John McNee, led a delegation of several Member States to Sierra Leone. The delegation met with a range of national actors and international partners, including President Koroma and the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Finance, representatives of political parties and of Sierra Leonean's democratic institutions, as well as civil society and members of the diplomatic community in Freetown. The visit focused on the Peacebuilding Commission priority areas of good governance, combating drug trafficking and illegal narcotics, and youth unemployment. The delegation had an opportunity to discuss at length the 2012

elections with all relevant actors. The Peacebuilding Commission delegation commended the remarkable progress made by Sierra Leone in consolidating its democratic institutions and reiterated the support of the Commission for the final phase of its peacebuilding process. Importantly, the delegation appealed to all parties to compete fairly in the 2012 elections, which would be based on clear rules to be agreed and accepted by all parties, well ahead of the election date.

VIII. Special Court for Sierra Leone

54. The closing arguments in the last trial before the Special Court of former Liberian President Charles Taylor concluded on 11 March 2011. A verdict is expected in September 2011.

55. On 24 May 2011, Trial Chamber II issued orders in two separate cases charging five persons with contempt of the Special Court. The cases involved the interference with witnesses in the trials concerning former members of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and Charles Taylor. One person pleaded guilty in the AFRC case and the case in the matter regarding the Charles Taylor trial was adjourned to later this year.

56. Both cases highlight the need for witness protection as part of the court's residual responsibilities. Consequently, discussions on establishing a national witness protection programme, which would serve Special Court witnesses and witnesses within the national system, have commenced with the Government.

IX. Regional cooperation

57. Sierra Leone continued to strengthen relations with its neighbours and other countries in the subregion. On 21 June, President Koroma hosted a one-day mini-summit of a five-nation ad hoc committee of Heads of State of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to review appointments to ECOWAS statutory bodies, including the ECOWAS Court of Justice and other organs of the Commission. The meeting was attended by the Presidents of Liberia, Guinea-Bissau and Togo, as well as the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Mali.

58. President Koroma attended, on 17 July, an extraordinary summit of Heads of State and Government of the Mano River Union in Monrovia. The summit expressed satisfaction at the relative peace and stability in the Mano River Basin, as well as positive developments in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea. In a final communiqué adopted at the end of the summit, participants pledged to enhance their cooperation towards joint security and the development of infrastructure among Mano River Union member States.

X. Observations and recommendations

59. I applaud Sierra Leone for the efforts on peace consolidation and socio-economic progress, despite significant challenges. That progress is a testimony to the untiring efforts of its Government and of other actors whose contribution to promoting national cohesion, political tolerance and non-violence would remain critical before, during and after the 2012 elections.

60. I am encouraged by the upcoming commencement of the voter registration process in the first quarter of 2012. I urge all political parties and their supporters to come together in the national interest in order to create a peaceful and conducive environment for an electoral process that meets acceptable democratic standards. It is also essential that Sierra Leone maintains strong and confident political parties, which, ultimately, are agents of change. I therefore call on Sierra Leone's political party leaders to promote a culture of constructive dialogue aimed at resolving peacefully inter-party and intra-party differences.

61. I urge the media to play a more constructive role in the electoral process and to refrain from any inflammatory publications that can raise tensions or incite violence. I also call on the media to abide by the agreed revised Media Code of Conduct in order to help create and maintain a peaceful environment. The Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation has proved to be a useful tool in the dissemination of information and advancing national cohesion. It is essential that every effort be made to strengthen the Corporation's operational capabilities to allow it to continue to play its role as an independent national broadcaster.

62. I encourage strengthened collaboration between the extractive sector and national and international partners. Sierra Leone's extractive industries are crucial in promoting the country's economic prosperity through the provision of revenues to the Government, which in turn could generate employment opportunities. Closely related is the need for greater attention to social issues, and, in particular, minimizing poverty, inflationary pressures, youth unemployment and other problems confronting a majority of Sierra Leoneans. The establishment of strong accountability and transparency mechanisms is also required to ensure the sustainability of prospects for economic growth.

63. I welcome the proposal made by President Koroma to convene, at the earliest opportunity, a national conference of all stakeholders, to address political and other grievances, and reach agreement on the modalities for the holding of peaceful elections and the strengthening of efforts aimed at achieving national consensus and cohesion on the key challenges facing the country. My Executive Representative stands ready to assist the Government of Sierra Leone in organizing such an important conference.

64. I commend the continuing efforts of President Koroma and his Government to implement Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), particularly through the proposed legislation on a 30 per cent quota for women in elective positions. It is crucial that planning for the 2012 elections also take into account the necessary gender dimensions, and I urge all stakeholders to fully contribute to this process.

65. I also wish to express my appreciation for the continuing support of the Peacebuilding Commission to Sierra Leone, as well as the strong commitment of the outgoing Chair of the Sierra Leone configuration, Ambassador John McNee, former Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations. His engagement with national and international stakeholders has served the cause of peacebuilding in Sierra Leone and greatly supported the efforts of UNIPSIL. Over the coming months, the Peacebuilding Commission should continue to support core peacebuilding objectives in Sierra Leone, intensify its engagement in support of the electoral process in the country and provide timely advice to the Security Council for its consideration.

66. Taking into account planning for the 2012 elections, I recommend that the mandate of UNIPSIL, as expressed in Security Council resolution 1940 (2010) and previous relevant resolutions, be renewed for a further year. The renewal will also enable UNIPSIL to continue its peace consolidation and national reconciliation efforts, its support for good governance reforms, as well as tackling anti-corruption, drug trafficking and organized crime, addressing youth unemployment and building support for international donor assistance.

67. Finally, I thank President Koroma and the Government of Sierra Leone for their continued support to UNIPSIL in the performance of its mandate. I would like to express my appreciation to Sierra Leone's international development partners and to the African Development Bank and the World Bank for their contributions to the peace consolidation process in Sierra Leone. I also thank the staff of UNIPSIL and the United Nations system in Sierra Leone for their unstinting efforts in executing the mandate of UNIPSIL under the leadership of my Executive Representative, Michael von der Schulenburg.